

**IN SYRIA—RUSSIA WITHDRAWS, BUT PEACE UNLIKELY; IN  
EGYPT—AS ISRAEL RELATIONS IMPROVE, BARAKAT  
ASSASSINATION BLAMED ON HAMAS**

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Isranet Daily Briefing, March 15, 2016

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[So Much for Putin's Syria 'Quagmire': \*Wall Street Journal\*, March 10, 2016](#)—  
After Vladimir Putin sent Russian forces to Syria in September, President Obama offered this prediction: “An attempt by Russia and Iran to prop up [Bashar] Assad and try to pacify the population is just going to get them stuck in a quagmire and it won't work.”

[Will the Syrian Ceasefire Last?: Jonathan Spyer, \*Jerusalem Post\*, Mar. 13, 2016](#)—  
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[Hamas' Terrorism in Egypt: Yoni Ben Menachem, \*JCPA\*, Mar. 10, 2016](#) — In recent weeks, senior Hamas officials in the Gaza Strip claimed that the movement's relations with Egypt have improved somewhat thanks to contacts initiated by Hamas leaders.

[The Israeli-Egyptian Love Affair: Ben Caspit, \*Al-Monitor\*, Feb. 29, 2016](#)— Egyptian parliament member and TV talk show host Tawfiq Okasha let the genie out of the bottle.

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*Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 14, 2016

After Vladimir Putin sent Russian forces to Syria in September, President Obama offered this prediction: “An attempt by Russia and Iran to prop up [Bashar] Assad and try to pacify the population is just going to get them stuck in a quagmire and it won’t work.”

As quagmires go, Mr. Putin will take it. On Monday he announced that Russia will begin withdrawing the “main part” of its forces in Syria having accomplished his strategic goals at little cost. Mr. Putin rescued Mr. Assad when Russia’s Middle Eastern client was in danger of falling and has put him in a much stronger position. Russia focused its bombing on Mr. Assad’s moderate Sunni opponents, not Islamic State. The bombing and Hezbollah’s ground forces have broken the opposition’s hold on Aleppo and consolidated a larger safe zone in the Syrian west for the Alawite regime.

Having established these facts on the ground, Mr. Assad is now well placed to exploit the U.S.-Russia brokered Syrian peace talks. Mr. Assad can continue his offensive against the opposition while making few diplomatic concessions. Mr. Putin has also consolidated his alliance with Iran while diminishing U.S. influence.

By withdrawing some forces, or at least appearing to, Mr. Putin is also hoping to coax concessions from the U.S. and Europe. The Russian wants the West to ease its sanctions against Russia for snatching Ukrainian territory, and he knows Mr. Obama is looking for a way get back to business as usual with Russia. The withdrawal announcement may be an attempt to give Mr. Obama diplomatic cover for one more “reset” in relations before Mr. Obama leaves the White House.

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Russia's intervention won't end the Syrian civil war, and Israel's Status still controls much of the country. But countering terrorism never was Mr. Putin's goal. He wanted to show the world that Russia stands by its allies and to acquire new leverage in the Middle East and Europe. Any more such quagmires and he'll be back sipping cocktails at the next G-8 summit.

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**WILL THE SYRIAN CEASEFIRE LAST?**

*Jonathan Spyer*

[Jerusalem Post](#), Mar. 13, 2016

The cease-fire that came into effect in Syria on February 27 is a partial success. Humanitarian convoys have begun to get through to some of the areas besieged by government forces. The death toll is sharply down.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the civilian death toll in Syria fell by 90 percent last week. This was accompanied by an 80% decline in deaths among combatants on all sides.

“Proximity” talks between the sides are set to commence in Geneva on Wednesday. The government has announced it will attend. The opposition High Negotiations Committee has yet to make a final decision but will probably also be there.

So does the cease-fire in Syria represent the beginnings of an endgame in the long and bloody civil war which has racked the country since mid- 2011? This is a war in which, according to a recent report by the Damascus-based Syrian Center for Policy Research, up to 470,000 people have died. Fully 11.5% of the population have been killed or injured, and 45% have left their homes.

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As of now, there remains very little chance of the implementation of the plan outlined in Vienna last November for the diplomatic process in Syria. According to this plan, within six months of the commencement of negotiations, the sides are to establish a “credible, inclusive and nonsectarian” transitional government. This government will then set about drafting a new constitution and holding free and fair UN-supervised election within 18 months.

The tentative success of the February 27 cease-fire notwithstanding, this plan still sounds utterly unrealistic.

Its main stumbling block remains the core disagreement between regime and opposition over the future role of President Bashar Assad. For the opposition, any role for Assad in the course of the transition remains utterly unacceptable. For Assad, riding high on the results of the Russian intervention which began in September last year, there is no reason to compromise or contemplate departure. On the contrary, the Syrian dictator bullishly (and absurdly) announced this week that parliamentary elections will take place across Syria on April 13.

Since the officially sanctioned diplomatic process remains somewhat other-worldly, and yet the cease-fire has not been a total failure, what direction are events likely to take? As of now, Syria has fragmented, and a host of related conflicts are taking place over its ruins. The Russian intervention has effectively removed from the table the possibility of the military destruction of the dictatorship.

For this to be achieved, an air force capable of besting that of the Russians, who guarantee Assad’s survival, would need to enter the fray. Such air power is possessed only by the US. Washington has absolutely no intention of acting as the air wing of the Syrian Sunni rebels, in a way analogous to that of the Russians vis-à-vis the regime. Since this is likely to remain the case, it follows that there is no longer any credible military threat to the continued existence of the Assad regime in its enclave in Damascus, in the western coastal area, in the cities of western Syria and in the areas linking them.

This being said, it remains the case that a regime reconquest of the entirety of Syria also remains unlikely. Assad, in a recent interview, declared this to be his goal. But it is unlikely that the actual forces that could conceivably achieve this goal for him - Russian air power and Iranian proxies on the ground - are interested in pursuing it.

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**Iran is withdrawing Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps personnel from northwest Syria. The immediate goal of preventing any threat to the regime has been achieved. The Iranian regime does not appear to wish to commit its own forces to the mutual slaughterhouse that a campaign to reconquer all of rebel and Sunni jihadist-controlled Syria would entail.**

**The Russians, too, appear wary of a long and grinding campaign of reconquest. With a devalued ruble and very low oil prices, it is not clear that they could sustain the necessary expenditure. Again, the goal of the Russian campaign appears to have been to preserve the regime enclave, not to enter an all-out assault for the reunification of Syria by military means.**

**Even Assad himself may be aware that an attempt at reunifying the country under his rule would bring back the original dilemma that caused his withdrawal in the first place. Assad does not possess sufficient forces to securely govern those areas that reject his rule. The Russian intervention has not altered this core reality. Russia wants to see the removal of Ukraine-related sanctions on it, and to be treated as a world power. Backing its allies and ensuring their survival forms a part of this. An ongoing bloody campaign of reconquest is unlikely to do so.**

**So if the disparate rebellion can't beat Assad, and if Assad is unlikely to achieve or even try for a knockout blow against the rebellion, and if there is no basis for a negotiated settlement, doesn't that mean that the diplomacy is doomed, the cease-fire bound to be short-lived, and a return to full blown conflict inevitable? Maybe, but not necessarily. It is worth remembering that there are two other vital players on the Syrian map, apart from the Assad regime and the Sunni Arab rebellion. The two other elements are the Kurds, and Islamic State. As of now, a Western-backed military alliance, the Syrian Democratic Forces, is making steady headway against Islamic State. If this progress can continue, the prospect opening up in Syria will be for a Russian-guaranteed, Assad-ruled west, and a US-guaranteed east, in which Islamic State has either been destroyed or is in the process of eclipse.**

**On this basis, with neither side able to dislodge the other and neither side having an obvious interest in continued conflict (or with each side deterred by inescapable realities if they do), it is possible to imagine the beginning of a diplomatic process based on the emergence of a confederal or de facto divided**

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Syria.

Such an outcome is, of course, not certain, but it is possible. If it does not emerge, the bloodletting in Syria is likely to recommence with full force in the future, and the current cease-fire to be remembered as little more than a brief respite.

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**HAMAS' TERRORISM IN EGYPT**

*Yoni Ben Menachem*

[JCPA](#), Mar. 10, 2016

In recent weeks, senior Hamas officials in the Gaza Strip claimed that the movement's relations with Egypt have improved somewhat thanks to contacts initiated by Hamas leaders. However, an announcement by the Egyptian Interior Ministry on March 6, 2016, sharply rebuffed such claims. In a press conference, the Egyptian interior minister, General Magdy Abdel Ghaffar, declared that Egyptian security forces had arrested a network of 48 Muslim Brotherhood terror operatives responsible for the assassination of Egyptian Prosecutor General Hisham Barakat and that Hamas had played a "major role" in training the operatives.

Barakat was killed by a car bomb directed at his convoy as it passed through central Cairo. A short time after the murder, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi stated: "The order to kill the prosecutor general came from the prison cells of accused Muslim Brotherhood leaders in Egypt," while official Egyptian media claimed that the order had been given by ousted and jailed Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi. The Balad Egyptian TV channel cited an Egyptian security expert who said the explosives used in the attack had been brought to Egypt from Qatar

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[through diplomatic mail channels of the Qatari embassy in Egypt. But Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood maintain offices in Qatar.](https://www.isranet.org/daily-briefing/syria-russia-withdraws-peace-unlikely-egypt-israel-relations-improve-barakat-)

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On March 6, 2016, the Egyptian interior minister announced that Barakat's assassination had been planned by Muslim Brotherhood leaders who had found political asylum in Turkey and that the terrorists had been trained by Hamas. Hamas, he said, had played a "major role" in training and preparing the perpetrators over a period of three months. That claim was bolstered by electronic communications between Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood leaders in Turkey that were intercepted by Egypt.

The Egyptian operatives had been trained in northern Sinai and then brought into Gaza with the help of Bedouin residents. At the end of the training, they returned to Sinai where they prepared the explosives for the attack. The Egyptian Interior Ministry said the terror operatives who were apprehended also planned to attack several public figures as well as foreign embassies in Egypt, with the aim of destabilizing the country.

In its statement, the Interior Ministry asserted: "The Palestinian problem is one issue and what Hamas perpetrates is another. The connection with Hamas will be shown from its involvement in the prosecutor general affair." Hamas was surprised by the Egyptian announcement. The movement's spokesman in Gaza, Sami Abu Zuhri, issued a statement denying the Egyptian claims. "The allegations," it said, "are not true and not consistent with the efforts that have been invested in developing ties with Egypt." This is not the first time Egypt has accused Hamas of terror activity within Egypt in cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is Hamas' parent movement.

Egyptian authorities say Hamas is also actively assisting Wilayat Sinai, the Islamic State movement's branch in northern Sinai, and that this aid involves training its operatives in Gaza and treating its wounded fighters in Gaza hospitals. In return,

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Wilayat Sinai helps Hamas smuggle weapons into Gaza from Sinai

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The timing of the Egyptian announcement on Hamas and Turkey's connection with the prosecutor general's murder is not coincidental. Egypt is now under pressure from Saudi Arabia to agree to a Turkish foothold in Gaza, linked to the easing of the blockade and the building of a floating seaport that would enable Turkish ships to reach the Gaza Strip. The Egyptians strongly oppose Turkey's demand because of its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, outlawed by Egypt, and because of Hamas' involvement in terror within Egypt. The highlighting of Turkey and Hamas' connection with the Muslim Brotherhood terror gang that assassinated the prosecutor general helps Egypt rebuff the Saudi pressures.

Hamas is gravely perplexed by the Egyptian interior minister's announcement. The movement pins great hopes on Turkey's efforts to get Israel to ease the blockade on Gaza and build the floating seaport in return for normalization of Turkish-Israeli relations. What Hamas fears is that Egypt will torpedo Turkey's efforts regarding Gaza so that it can tighten the blockade and control the Strip's borders along with Israel. Hamas also fears that Egypt will decide to declare it, too, a terror organization, just as the Gulf States declared Hizbullah to be one on March 2, 2016. The Arab interior ministers' meeting in Tunisia also came out in support of the move against Hizbullah.

About a year ago, the Egypt government responded to insistent pleading by Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and some Arab states by canceling a court ruling in Egypt that had declared Hamas a terror organization. At this stage, however, the government will likely reinitiate such a move against Hamas. A lawsuit against Hamas was filed by an Egyptian lawyer and is due to be heard in the Alexandria Court of Urgent Matters on March 23, 2016.

Meanwhile, Egypt is rejecting Hamas' requests for a permanent opening of the Rafah crossing, Gaza's only egress to the Arab world. Since Sisi took office Egypt



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~~has opened the crossing for only a few days each year. The assassination blames the Hamas government, which is working with radical Islamic forces to undermine the Egyptian regime.~~

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**THE ISRAELI-EGYPTIAN LOVE AFFAIR**

***Ben Caspit***

**[Al-Monitor](#), Feb. 29, 2016**

Egyptian parliament member and TV talk show host Tawfiq Okasha let the genie out of the bottle. Even though a shoe was thrown in his face by Kamel Ahmed, another parliament member, and despite the savage attacks directed at him in the Egyptian media and public forum in recent days, the sharp-tongued, brazen Okasha doesn't get excited. His crime was defined by the media as "the crime of normalization," for the fact that he invited Haim Koren, Israel's ambassador to Egypt, to his house for dinner on Feb. 24. Okasha even heaped praises on the ambassador and on the collaboration and normalization of relations between Israel and Egypt.

Okasha wouldn't have dared to invite Koren without a wink from someone upstairs. He knows that Egypt's higher stratum — from the president to the regime's high echelons, the military, intelligence and the elites — view Israel as an important, powerful ally in regional struggles. But "the other Egypt," the lower echelons, have not yet internalized this change. The masses, together with most of the politicians, public opinion leaders, journalists and writers still view the Jewish state as a type of satanic entity: the eternal, mythological and hated enemy. And they see no reason to moderate their view of the Jewish state at this time.

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The peace agreement between Israel and Egypt was signed on March 19, 1979, after 37 years ago on the White House lawn, at a ceremony attended by Prime Minister Menachem Begin, US President Jimmy Carter and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. The agreement has survived many vicissitudes over the years and demonstrates impressive stability, but has no effect on the lives of the Egyptian masses. Normalization does not exist; Egyptian citizens were barred from visiting Israel by the *mukhabarat* (Egyptian secret service). Any flash or hint of any kind of cooperation with official Israeli sources, any clue of an Israeli presence in culture, films or literature immediately encounters a barbed-wire wall of invectives, vituperation and violence from all sides.

The stormy love affair between Egypt and Israel is dramatic and clandestine. Israel's military censorship forbids dissemination of exact details of the deepening cooperation between the states. It was actually Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, in an interview with the *Washington Post* in March 2015, who said that he speaks to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu frequently, sometimes several times a month. In reality, Sisi talks to Netanyahu even more than that, and not only to Netanyahu. On the list of Egypt's close allies, Israel's name is a front-runner. It is almost unprecedented how so many of the interests of the two countries have converged and complement one another. Even the list of enemies held by Israel and Egypt includes the same names, more or less.

It is very convenient for Sisi to secretly enjoy the fruits of Israel's intelligence, experience and power, while publically allowing his nation's masses to curse and abuse Israel as an anger-channeling tool and a type of demon or scapegoat that can be blamed for all of Egypt's socio-economic problems. Nonetheless, it is clear that the closeness between Sisi and Israel's highest echelons is not a superficial one. "Sisi understands the situation," said a high-ranking Israeli security source speaking on condition of anonymity. "He knows exactly whom he can trust in the region and whom he can't. He knows what's good for Egypt and, under the correct circumstances, what's good for Egypt is also good for Israel."

Following the incident in which Koren dined at Okasha's table, the Israeli

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**ambassador told Channel 10 that he himself met personally with Sisi on a number of times. This, too, is unprecedented. Until the Sisi era, Israeli**

**ambassadors in Egypt were ostracized outcasts: They were holed up in an isolated embassy, totally cut off from the country around them. They spent their weekends in Israel in order to breathe some fresh air and mingle with other people.**

**Suddenly, the Israeli ambassador has become a welcome, frequent guest in the Egyptian president's premises. Sisi, who long served as a general, himself is well-acquainted with, and close to, Israeli Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot. They once served in parallel positions in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the Egyptian army. Thus, their cooperation extends over many years, and they share a common language and mutual respect. Sisi and his generals also share close relationships with the IDF higher-ups.**

**For the first time in many generations, intelligence information is almost totally shared between the sides, mainly with regard to the struggle against the Islamic State (IS) branch in the Sinai Peninsula. Israel and Egypt rely on one another in their joint struggle against Hamas and IS. "As far as the Egyptians are concerned," a senior Israeli military source told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity, "the Muslim Brotherhood is comparable to the Nazis. Hamas is perceived as an arm of the Muslim Brotherhood; thus, they are viewed as an enemy that must be destroyed. The Islamic State has joined this equation recently, and they share the exact same rubric."**

**For many long years, Israel begged the Egyptians to block Hamas' tunnels — tunnels that allowed Gaza to become a veritable storehouse of weapons, rockets and missiles. Under former President Hosni Mubarak, and also under his successor, Mohammed Morsi, Egypt almost didn't lift a finger. Egypt's actions were half-hearted and had little effect on reality. By contrast, Sisi adopted this mission with great zeal, and the Egyptians destroyed all of the tunnels. Some were flooded with ocean water and some were blocked up. They did this out of unmistakable Egyptian interests: Intelligence information, some of which came from Israel, point to tight coordination between Hamas and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Sinai, which turned into a local branch of IS. Sisi declared an all-out war on IS, and he could not have made any achievements without the great assistance he received from Israel, in many different spheres. According to a high-placed Israeli military source,**

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speaking on condition of anonymity, “The efficacy of the Egyptian intelligence apparatus against IS is gradually improving. This is true for intelligence, for preciseness and for rapid response. The Egyptians know that Gaza’s Hamas provides IS with military experts, they know that wounded Sinai IS operatives are treated in Gaza, they know that there is a direct, close connection between the sides. Thus, they try to block all passageways between the Gaza Strip and Sinai.”...

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## **On Topic**

**[Don't Trust Putin's Syria Pullback](#): Leonid Bershidsky, *Bloomberg*, Mar. 14, 2016—President Vladimir Putin's unexpected announcement that Russian troops would pull back from Syria shouldn't be taken at face value: He's made similar announcements in the past to show Western negotiating partners how constructive he can be. He always has a hidden agenda.**

**[The Strategy Behind Russia's Moves in Syria](#): Nikolay Pakhomov, *National Interest*, Mar. 15, 2016 —When the Russian bombing campaign started in Syria last fall, one could assume that Moscow's actions would begin to reveal more about the country's foreign policy. This assumption is proving to be correct now, after President Putin announced the withdrawal of Russia's main forces. Moscow's actions in Syria over the last half year have clarified both the guidelines of Russian foreign policy and how they help in dealing with very complicated problems of the Middle East.**

**[Hamis Pleads With Egypt: Stop Destroying Terror Tunnels](#): Ariella Mendlowitz, *Breaking Israel News*, Mar. 14, 2016—Hamis on Sunday sent a delegation to Egypt in an effort to beseech Egyptian security officials to stop destroying its tunnels out of Gaza. These terror tunnels, employed by the terrorist group for nearly a decade, are used to store weapons, smuggle supplies, and infiltrate enemy territory - Israel - as well as carry out surprise attacks in which people are killed and soldiers abducted.**

**[Shin Bet: Palestinian Oversight Anti-Israeli Terror Group in Cairo](#): *Ynet*, Mar. 6,**

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~~2016—Israel arrested in January a Palestinian who allegedly assassinated Egyptian Prime Minister Mohamed Morsi in 2013. The man, identified as Najib Mustafa Nizal, was arrested in 2007 in order to found a terrorist cell dedicated to attacking Israel, it was cleared for publication on Sunday. Najib Mustafa Nizal, 33, was a resident of Qatabiya until moving to Egypt, supposedly for school.~~